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THE BAY OF PIGS REVISITED

Former CIA Aide Tells What He'd Do Differently

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By ORR KELLY
Star Staff Writer

HARTFORD, Conn.—If he had it to do over again, the chief architect of the Bay of Pigs invasion says he might have the United States recognize a Cuban government-in-exile and openly provide it with money and "volunteer" fighting men.

In an interview here yesterday, Richard M. Bissell Jr., who was in charge of planning the invasion for the Central Intelligence Agency, said everyone involved miscalculated the chances of keeping the U.S. role a secret.

"The hope existed that it could be plausibly disclaimed by the U.S. government. We thought we could plausibly state that this was an independent operation.

"But it became obvious to all that what was being done in Cuba could not have been done by an unaided exile group," Bissell said.

The operation, planned during the latter days of the Eisenhower administration and the early days of the Kennedy administration, involved the landing of a small U.S.-trained and equipped force of exiles on the south coast of Cuba on April 17, 1961. It ended in disaster on the afternoon of April 19 when the invaders ran out of ammunition and supplies. It was the Kennedy administration's worst hour.

As it turned out, the effort to cover up U.S. involvement was a limit on the operation and seriously diminished the chances of success—but did not succeed in hiding the fact of the U.S. role—Bissell said.

Early in the planning, for example, it was decided that the air force of the exile army would have to be made up of planes available on the open market. Because of the distance they would have to fly—1,200 miles—this meant that no fighter planes could be used to provide air cover for the B-26 bombers and the men on the ground.

"I now believe it is better not to try to organize an operation of this kind if it has to be done on a scale or in a manner such that the U.S. really, plausibly cannot occupy essentially a passive role," Bissell said.

Bissell, who developed the U-2 spy plane and played a minor role in the CIA-backed overthrow of the government of Guatemala in 1954, is convinced that the U.S. will have to intervene in the affairs of other countries with some frequency in the future.

"There is a succession of places around the world where it will seem essential and wise for the U.S. government to use its power to avoid an even worse outcome," Bissell said. "I am not one who wants the circle of such instances widened—God forbid—but such cases will arise.

"This is a distasteful form of intervention, but we have been intervening in the affairs of countries all over the world for years. The Marshall Plan was certainly the most massive form of intervention since World War II.

"Some people argue that such intervention is benign, but restoring law and order can be benign too," he declared.

"The question of propriety or impropriety comes down to this: 'Is it ever justifiable to intervene against a lawfully established government?' I think there are bound to be occasions when it is."

No Bitterness

Now an executive of the United Aircraft Corp., which has its headquarters here, Bissell sat calmly in his bright, white-paneled office toying with a tiny rubber tire as he talked of the tense days of late 1960 and early 1961.

Although he has been given a large share of the blame for the Bay of Pigs fiasco, he talked dispassionately and without apparent bitterness.

He made one mildly critical reference to another high-level participant, but carefully put that off the record.

"I agree with what (Secretary of State Dean) Rusk always said, that there was enough blame to go around so there was no use arguing about how to share it," Bissell said.

Kennedy Remained "Warm"

After the invasion had failed, he added, the relationship between him and President John F. Kennedy remained a "warm" one.

"He was considerate always," Bissell recalled. "He was encouraging and friendly."

Bissell resigned from the CIA, where he was deputy director-plans, in February 1962.

The new director, John C. McCone, he explained, wanted to reorganize the agency and this would have involved splitting Bissell's duties between two people. Bissell said McCone asked him to stay and he believed McCone was sincere in this request, but he felt the change was not a wise one and decided to resign.

One day in April, two months after his resignation, Bissell got a call and was asked to come to the White House. Currious about the unusual summons, he called McGeorge Bundy, who told him he was to receive the National Security Medal from the President. The award was not announced, but did get into the papers.

The citation which accompanied the award—most often given to agents who have distinguished themselves in secret operations—praises Bissell for 20 years of government service and for "blending theory and practice in a manner unparalleled in the intelligence profession."

Bissell described the citation wryly as "fairly formal and deliberately not revealing."

Denies Lack of Restraint

Except for relatively minor details, Bissell's recollections of the events leading up to the Cuba invasion and the debacle itself coincide closely with a number of reports that have already been published. But he differs sharply with some interpretations of those events.

Those who accuse the CIA of operating irresponsibly and outside the normal restraints of government irritate him particularly.

"After years of chafing under control and the need to coordinate everything with State and Defense, I find this particularly galling," he said. "If what they say were true, it would of course be highly improper, but it would be more fun."

He said the restraints imposed on the CIA are a matter of public record in the case of the Bay of Pigs.

"No one can deny that it was a disaster and that a lot of people were wrong. But to say it was irresponsible is false on the record."

Kennedy Made Decisions

From the moment when he was first briefed by Bissell and Dulles at Palm Beach, Fla. shortly after his election until a pitiful handful of survivors were rescued from the beach, President Kennedy was kept fully informed and made the key decisions, Bissell said.

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In a philosophic mood, Bissell said there is always a conflict between the "operational" people—usually the CIA or Defense, who want every advantage they can get to do their assigned task, and those who have to consider broader government policy—usually the State Department.

"It is the President who has to make the decisions. This is one of the most difficult tasks of any President.

"I am not about to be—I am not prepared to be—critical of the President's decisions."

"No Final Plan"

Under instructions from the President, the invasion was planned in such a way that it could be called off up until 24 hours of the actual operation.

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., historian and a top-level adviser to Kennedy, writes in the current issue of Life magazine that he believes Bissell and Dulles, "perhaps . . . unconsciously supposed that once the operation began to unfold, it would not be permitted to fail."

Bissell recalled: "We did warn more than once that there would be a very difficult problem with this armed, highly motivated unit in case the operation were canceled. We had no final plan of what would become of it.

"They (the exiles) were the most powerful military force between Mexico and Panama and it is entirely possible that they might have tried to seize a base in Nicaragua, Honduras or Guatemala. There is not the slightest doubt that they could have defeated any Guatemalan force."

Concurs With Schlesinger

Now, with the advantages of hindsight, Bissell is inclined to agree with Schlesinger that the CIA people were so involved with the plan that they accepted "progressive modifications of the plan so long as the expedition in some form remained."

"We can be criticized for allowing this chipping away to go on without insisting on the whole plan or on cancellation," Bissell said.

"Because we were so involved in seeing it go ahead, we did not insist on as great freedom of action as we needed."

Bissell still feels that the decision to cancel the second scheduled air strike by the Cuban B-26 bombers because of a rising tide of criticism from other countries might have made a critical difference in the outcome of the invasion.

Lack of Bombs

"If we had been able to dump five times the tonnage of bombs on Castro's airfields, we would have had a damned good chance," he said.

Schlesinger, who now blames himself for not being more vigorous in his opposition to the whole plan—for failing to "blow the whistle on this whole nonsense"—writes that he doesn't feel the second air strike would have done much further damage to U.S. prestige. But he doesn't agree with Bissell that it might have turned the tide and made possible the overthrow of Castro.

Underestimated Planes

Failure to destroy Castro's tiny, antiquated air force on the ground left him with air superiority over the invasion beaches. And while his planes did not do much harm to the men on the ground, Bissell said, they blew up a vitally important supply ship and denied the invaders the help they needed from their own planes. Even the Joint Chiefs of Staff underestimated the "catastrophic" damage a few ancient planes could cause, he added.

"Viewed as a military operation, the invasion could have failed for a number of reasons," Bissell said. "It did in fact fail because of lack of control of the air.

"The invading force was completely dependent on air support not just to keep the supply lines open and prevent air attacks against the ground forces, but also as the equivalent of artillery or heavy armor."

When Bissell learned that Kennedy had canceled the second air strike on the advice of Rusk, he and Gen. Charles B. Cabell, deputy director of the CIA, went to Rusk and urged him to ask the President to change his decision. Rusk talked to the President and asked if Bissell or Cabell wanted to talk to him. They declined.

"We felt that Rusk's position would prevail with the President," he said. "I regret now that we didn't talk to him, but I don't think we would have changed his mind."

Later Call In Vain

Later that night—Sunday, April 16, hours before the start of the invasion—Cabell awakened the President and proposed a more limited form of air strike, Bissell said, but his plea was again unsuccessful.

Many of the Cubans who took part in the invasion told Haynes Johnson, Star reporter and author of the book "The Bay of Pigs," that they were led to believe they would get American air cover for the invasion.

"We were told absolutely clearly before this—and the Cubans were told as clearly as we could express it to them—that they would not have active U. S. intervention," Bissell said.

The political leaders among the Cuban exiles complained bitterly that they were left out of the planning. Bissell agrees that this was true.

"It was unfortunate that they couldn't have been given a greater role," he said. "But the political leaders were hideously insecure. Almost anything said to them was immediately circulated in the rumor-ridden community in Miami. We needed surprise—and we couldn't take chances with rumors."

Two Plans

According to one of what Schlesinger refers to as the "mythologies" of the Bay of Pigs, the United States was prepared for massive intervention as soon as a provisional government could be established on Cuban soil and call for help.

Bissell says there was no such plan. Schlesinger doesn't discuss this.

Bissell foresaw two possibilities for a successful outcome of the invasion.

In the first, a successful beachhead would have permitted strategic bombing of military targets up and down the island, leading to the disintegration of the Castro government.

Impasse, Then Elections

In the second, an impasse would have been reached in which the exiles would not have been able to extend their power, but Castro would not have been able to push them off the island. This might have led to a negotiated cease-fire and free elections.

"I never thought U.S. forces would get into the operation except possibly in the event of a stalemate to enforce a cease-fire," Bissell said.

In his new job, it is Bissell's task to find new roles for United Aircraft in non-defense lines.

Looking out through the Venetian blinds at the park-like entrance to the plant, he remarked:

"I think any one who has been down there in Washington, right in the thick of things, misses it when he leaves."

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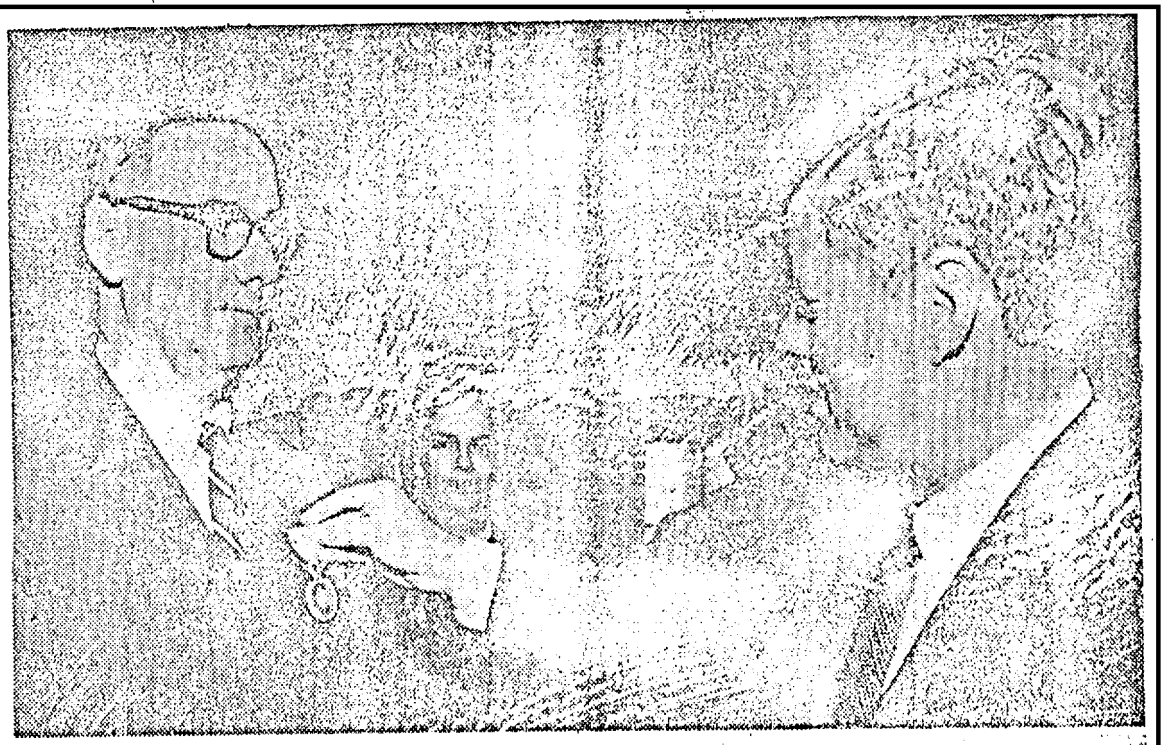

In this April, 1962, picture, just made public, Richard M. Bissell Jr. receives the National Security Medal from President Kennedy. In background, from left to right, are his son, Winthrop, and his wife and daughter, both named Ann.

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